

## Meet Virginia Hamilton



*The House of Dies Drear* was inspired by a part of Virginia Hamilton's family history that was "so secret. it took my mother a long time to tell even me about it," she says. Hamilton's grandfather, Levi Perry, was a slave who "had traveled through the secret Underground Railroad from the state of Virginia (thus my name)" to the town of Yellow Springs, Ohio, where Hamilton grew up. Along the way, he had been helped by the abolitionist John Rankin. Rankin's house in Ripley, Ohio—like many others in the area—had provided runaway slaves with a safe hiding place as they fled north toward freedom. Those houses also provided Hamilton with material for her story.

The research Hamilton did for the book deepened her respect for her grandfather and for others who risked so much for freedom. Hamilton describes writing *The House of Dies Drear* as "my way of paying tribute to my roots." The book has won several awards and was dramatized on the television program "Wonderworks." A chapter from another of Hamilton's novels, *Willie Bea and the Time the Martians Landed*, appears in Unit 6.



The background of the cover is a painting of a house at night. The house has horizontal wooden siding and a dark doorway. A porch with a white railing and a white column is on the right. A set of wooden steps leads up to the porch. A small black lantern is mounted on the wall to the left of the door. In the bottom right corner, there are some pink flowers and green grass.

# The House of Dies Drear

by Virginia Hamilton  
illustrated by Thomas Blackshear



*The Small family has just moved from North Carolina to Ohio. They learn that their new home has an extraordinary history. The house was formerly owned by the abolitionist Dies Drear. From 1810 to 1850, the house was a station on the Underground Railroad, a series of hiding places along a route that led from the United States to Canada. Hundreds of runaway slaves found shelter in the secret rooms and hidden tunnels of Drear's house. For many years now, the long-since deserted house has been tended to by Mr. Pluto.*

*As a history professor, Mr. Small has explained the history of the house to his son Thomas. Now Thomas is eager to investigate the house on his own. He is about to explore a passage below the front steps of the house when two very unusual children, Pesty and M. C. (Mac) Darrow, appear on the front lawn. They try to frighten Thomas by telling him about the dangers he might encounter if he dares to enter the secret passage. After chasing the children away, Thomas is more determined than ever to explore the house of Dies Drear, beginning with the large hole below the steps.*

**L**ying flat on his stomach, he looked into the hole; his head and shoulders disappeared inside. It was then he lost his grip and fell head first into thin, black air. He landed some five feet down, on damp sod that smelled like a mixture of yellow grass and mildew. All the breath was knocked out of him. He lay there unable to move or think for at least ten seconds, until air seeped back into his lungs. Otherwise he seemed not to have hurt himself. He could hear Pesty and M. C. Darrow going away. Mac was talking quietly to the child. Then Thomas couldn't hear them anymore.





There was gray light filtering down from the opening of the steps to where Thomas lay, and he could see that he was at the edge of a steep stairway cut out of rock. The stairs were wet; he could hear water dripping down on them from somewhere.

"I could have rolled down those steps," he whispered. Mac Darrow and Pesty must have known there was a drop down to where Thomas now lay. But they hadn't told him. "They are not friends then," said Thomas softly. He cautioned himself to be more careful.

I was showing off, he thought. I hurried and I fell. That was just what they'd wanted.

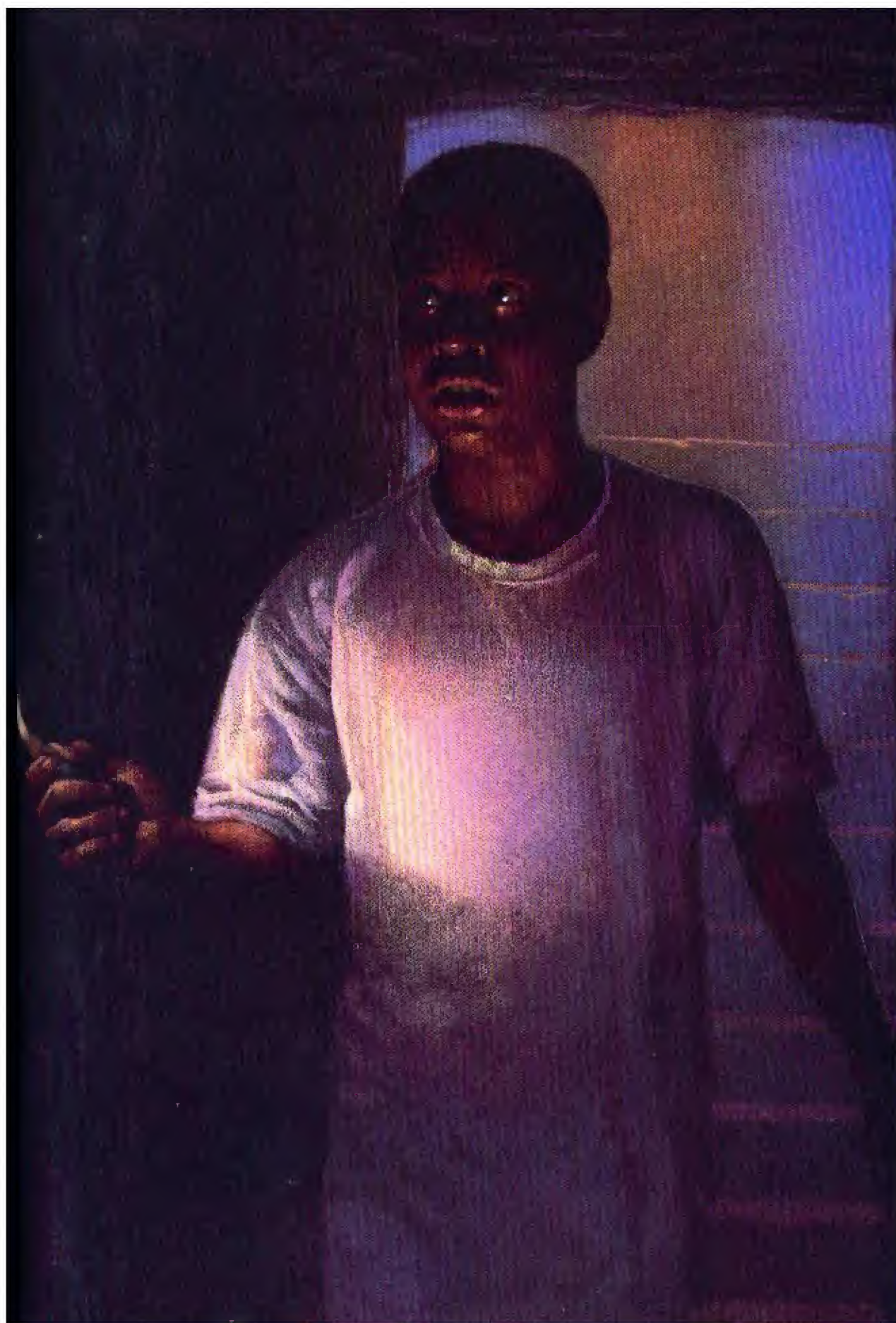
"Move slowly. Think fast," Thomas whispered. "Keep in mind what's behind and look closely at what's in front."

Thomas always carried a pencil-thin flashlight, which he sometimes used for reading in the car. He sat up suddenly and pulled out the flashlight. It wasn't broken from the fall, and he flicked it on. He sat in a kind of circle enclosed by brick walls. In some places, the brick had crumbled into powder, which was slowly filling up the circle of sod.

That will take a long time, thought Thomas. He looked up at the underside of the veranda steps.

Thomas got to his feet and made his way down the rock stairway into darkness. At the foot of the stairs was a path with walls of dirt and rock on either side of it. The walls were so close, Thomas could touch them by extending his arms a few inches. Above his head was a low ceiling carved out of rock. Such cramped space made him uneasy. The foundation of the house had to be somewhere above the natural rock. The idea of the whole three-story house of Dies Drear pressing down on him caused him to stop a moment on the path. Since he had fallen, he hadn't had time to be afraid. He wasn't now, but he did begin to worry a little about where the path led. He thought of ghosts, and yet he did not seriously





believe in them. "No," he told himself, "not with the flashlight. Not when I can turn back . . . when I can run."

And besides, he thought, I'm strong. I can take care of myself.

Thomas continued along the path, flickering his tiny beam of light this way and that. Pools of water stood in some places. He felt a coldness, like the stream of air that came from around the button on the oak doorframe. His shoes were soon soaked. His socks grew cold and wet, and he thought about taking them off. He could hear water running a long way off. He stopped again to listen, but he couldn't tell from what direction the sound came.

"It's just one of the springs," he said. His voice bounced off the walls strangely.

Better not speak. There could be tunnels leading off this one. You can't tell what might hear you in a place like this.

Thomas was scaring himself. He decided not to think again about other tunnels or ghosts. He did think for the first time of how he would get out of this tunnel. He had fallen five feet, and he wasn't sure he would be able to climb back up the crumbling brick walls. Still, the path he walked had to lead somewhere. There had to be another way out.

Thomas felt his feet begin to climb; the path was slanting up. He walked slowly on the slippery rock; then suddenly the path was very wide. The walls were four feet away on either side, and there were long stone slabs against each wall. Thomas sat down on one of the slabs. It was wet, but he didn't even notice.

"Why these slabs?" he asked himself. "For the slaves, hiding and running?"

He opened and closed a moist hand around the flashlight. The light beam could not keep back the dark. Thomas had a lonely feeling, the kind of feeling running slaves must have had.

And they dared not use light, he thought. How long would they have to hide down here? How could they stand it?

**T**homas got up and went on. He placed one foot carefully in front of the other on the path, which had narrowed again. He heard the faint sound of movement somewhere. Maybe it was a voice he heard, he couldn't be sure. He swirled the light around over the damp walls, and fumbled it. The flashlight slid out of his hand. For a long moment, he caught and held it between his knees before finally dropping it. He bent quickly to pick it up and stepped down on it. Then he accidentally kicked it with his heel, and it went rattling somewhere over the path. It hit the wall, but it had gone out before then. Now all was very dark.

"It's not far," Thomas said. "All I have to do is feel around."

He felt around with his hands over smooth, moist rock; his hands grew cold. He felt water, and it was icy, slimy. His hands trembled, they ached, feeling in the dark, but he could not find the flashlight.

"I couldn't have kicked it far because I wasn't moving." His voice bounced in a whisper off the walls. He tried crawling backward, hoping to hit the flashlight with his heels.

"It's got to be here . . . Papa?" Thomas stood, turning toward the way he had come, the way he had been crawling backward. He didn't at all like walking in the pitch blackness of the tunnel.

"I'll go on back," he said. "I'll just walk back as quick as I can. There'll be light coming from the veranda steps. I'll climb up that wall and then I'll be out of this. I'll get Papa and we'll do it together."

He went quickly now, with his hands extended to keep himself from hitting the close walls. But then something happened that caused him to stop in his tracks. He stood still, with his whole body tense and alert, the way he could be when he sensed a storm before there was any sign of it in the air or sky.

Thomas had the queerest notion that he was not alone. In front of him, between him and the steps of the veranda, something waited.





"Papa?" he said. He heard something.

The sound went, "Ahhh, ahhh, ahhh." It was not moaning, nor crying. It wasn't laughter, but something forlorn and lost and old.

Thomas backed away. "No," he said. "Oh please!"

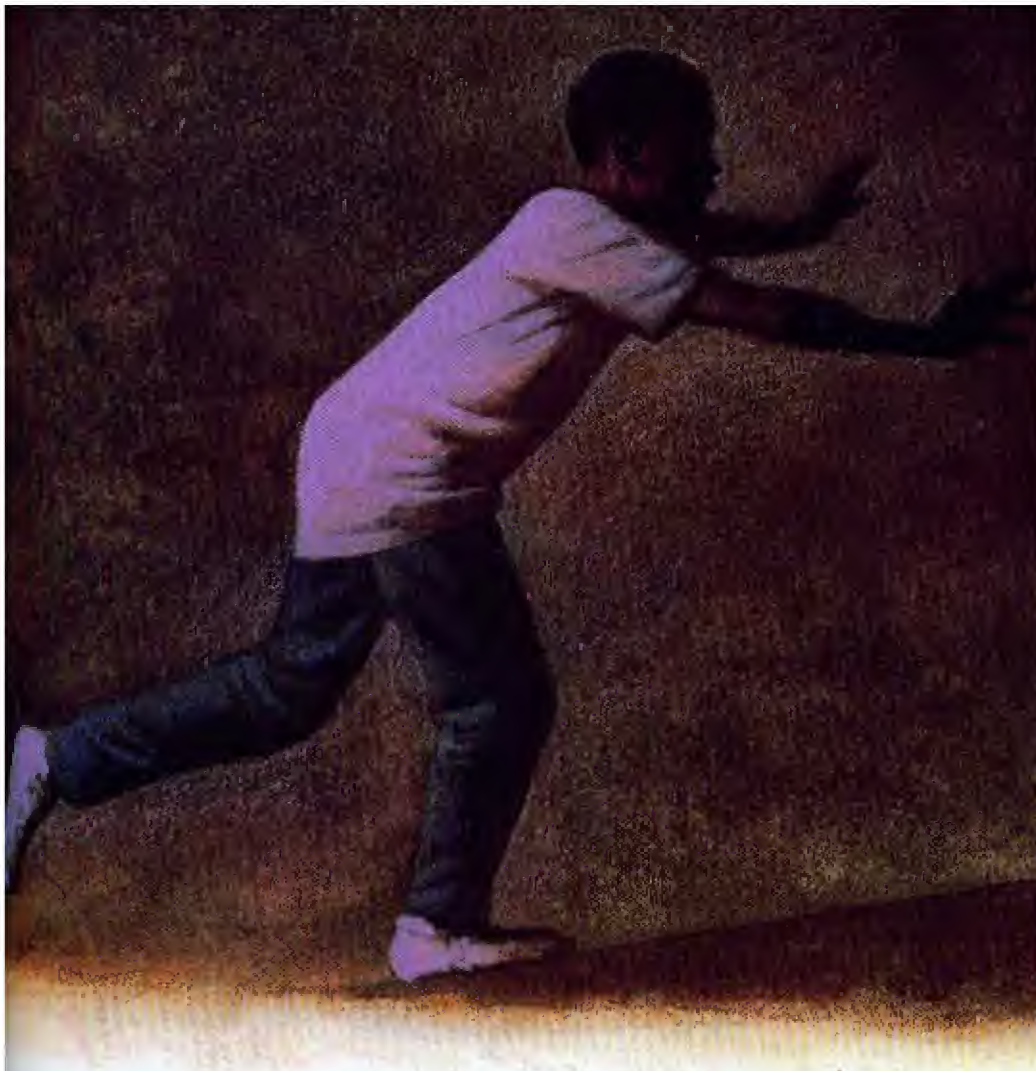
"Ahhh, ahhh," something said. It was closer to him now. Thomas could hear no footsteps on the path. He could see nothing in the darkness.

He opened his mouth to yell, but his voice wouldn't come. Fear rose in him; he was cold, freezing, as though he had rolled in snow.

"Papa!" he managed to say. His voice was a whisper. "Papa, come get me . . . Papa!"

"Ahhhh." Whatever it was, was quite close now. Thomas still backed away from it, then he turned around, away from the direction of the veranda. He started running up the path,





with his arms outstretched in front of him. He ran and ran, his eyes wide in the darkness. At any moment, the thing would grab him and smother his face. At any time, the thing would paralyze him with cold. It would take him away. It would tie him in one of the tunnels, and no one would ever find him.

"Don't let it touch me! Don't let it catch me!"

Thomas ran smack into a wall. His arms and hands hit first; then, his head and chest. The impact jarred him from head to foot. He thought his wrists were broken, but ever so slowly, painful feeling flowed back into his hands. The ache moved dully up to the sockets of his shoulders. He opened and closed his hands. They hurt so much, his eyes began to tear, but he didn't seem to have broken anything.

Thomas felt frantically along the wall. The wall was wood. He knew the feel of it right away. It was heavy wood, perhaps oak, and it was man made, man hewn. Thomas



pounded on it, hurting himself more, causing his head to spin. He kept on, because he knew he was about to be taken from behind by something ghostly and cold.

"Help me! It's going to get me!" he called. "Help me!"

Thomas heard a high, clear scream on the other side of the wall. Next came the sound of feet scurrying, and then the wall slid silently up.

"Thomas Small!" his mother said. "What in heaven's name do you think you are doing inside that wall!"

"I see you've found yourself a secret passage," said Mr. Small. "I hadn't thought you'd find that button by the front door so soon."

Mr. Small, with Billy and Buster, was seated at the kitchen table. They were finishing supper. Mr. Small smiled at Thomas, while the twins stared at him with solemn eyes.

Mrs. Small stood directly in front of Thomas and then stepped aside so that he could take a few steps into the kitchen. Thomas glanced behind him at the tunnel, a gaping space carved out of the comfortable kitchen. He saw nothing at all on the path.

He sat down beside his father. There was the good smell of food hanging in the air. The twins seemed full and content.

"You knew about that tunnel, Papa?" Thomas said. He felt discouraged, as though he'd been tricked.

"If anyone came unexpectedly to the front door," said Mr. Small, "the slaves could hide in the tunnel until whoever it was had gone. Or, if and when the callers began a search, the slaves could escape through the kitchen or by way of the veranda steps."

It's not any fun, Thomas thought. Not if he already knows about it.





“**T**homas, you frightened me!” Mrs. Small said. She had recovered enough to take her eyes from the tunnel and sit down beside Thomas at the table.

“Goodness, yelling like that all of a sudden,” she said, “I didn’t know what it was.” She jumped up, remembering Thomas hadn’t eaten, and quickly fixed his plate. Then she seated herself as before.

“Yes, why were you calling for help, Thomas?” asked Mr. Small. “You really made your mama scream.”

Thomas bent down to take off his shoes and socks. A pool of water stood dark and brackish on the linoleum. “There was something there,” he said.

Mrs. Small looked at him hard. Without a word, she got up and disappeared down the long hall from the kitchen toward the front of the house. When she returned, she carried a pair of Mr. Small’s socks and Thomas’ old tennis shoes.

“This is all I could find,” she said to Thomas. She fairly flung the shoes and socks into his lap. Then she cleaned up the pool of water.

“There was something on that path,” Thomas said. “It was coming after me as sure as I’m sitting here.”

“You shouldn’t make up stories like that,” his mother said, “not even as a joke.”

“There was something there.” His voice quivered slightly, and the sound of that was enough to tell Mr. Small that Thomas wasn’t joking.

“Then what was it?” asked Mr. Small. He watched Thomas closely.

“I don’t know,” Thomas said. “I didn’t see anything.”

His father smiled. “It was probably no more than your fear of the dark and strange surroundings getting the best of you.”

“I heard something though,” Thomas said. “It went ‘ahhh, ahhh’ at me and it came closer and closer.”

Mrs. Small sucked in her breath. She looked all around the kitchen, at the gaping hole and quickly away from it. The

kitchen was large, with a single lamp of varicolored glass hanging from the ceiling on a heavy, black chain. Her shadow, along with Thomas', loomed long and thin on a far wall.

"Thomas, don't make up things!" his father said sternly.

"I'm not, Papa!" There was a lump in Thomas' throat. He gripped the table and swallowed a few times. He had to find just the right words if ever his father was to believe him.

His hands rose in the air. They began to shape the air, to carve it, as though it were a pretty piece of pine. "It was like no other voice," he began. "It wasn't a high voice or a low voice, or even a man's voice. It didn't have anything bad in it or anything. I was just in its way, that's all. It had to get by me and it would have done anything to get around me along that path."

"I forbid you to go into that tunnel again!" whispered Mrs. Small. She was afraid now, and even Mr. Small stared at Thomas.

Mr. Small seemed to be thinking beyond what Thomas had told them. "You say you saw nothing?" he asked.

"I thought I heard somebody moving around," Thomas said, "but that could have been you all in here. Or maybe it was the kids, come back to scare me."

"Kids?" said Mr. Small.

"The Darrow children," Thomas said. "I mean that youngest Darrow boy and that little girl he calls Pesty, that lives with them although she doesn't really belong to them. She came riding around the house in her pajamas on this big horse, and M. C. Darrow was hanging on the horse's tail. He was trying to get the horse to stop, but it wouldn't. Only Pesty could stop that big horse, and she was so little, too."

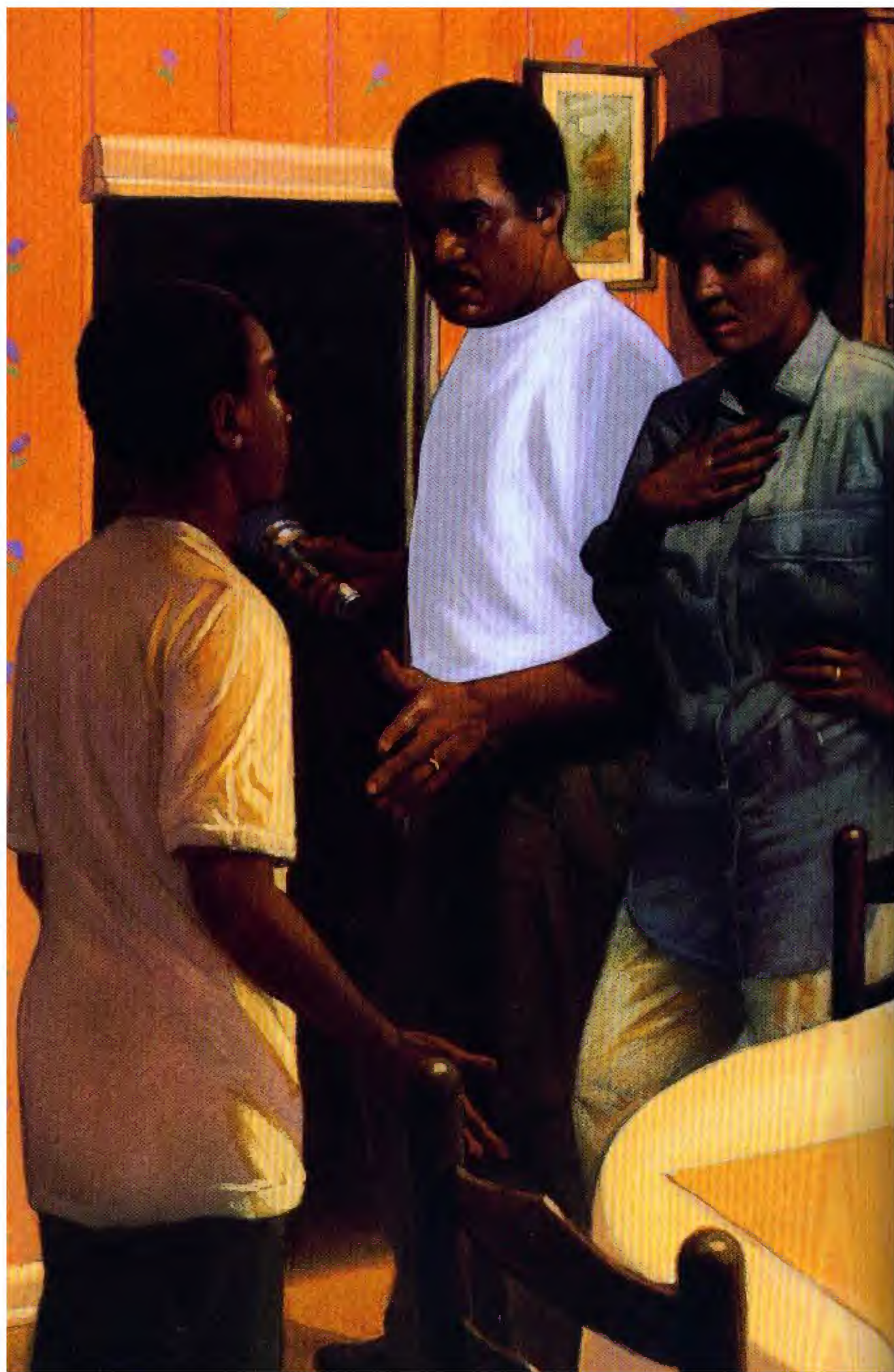
"What in the world . . ." said his father.

"Thomas, if you don't stop it!" warned Mrs. Small.

"Mama, it's the truth!" said Thomas. "There were these children, I'm not making it up! I can't help it if this is the craziest place we've ever lived in!"

"All right now," said Mr. Small. "Start over and take it slowly. You say there were children here?"





"Yes, they came from around the house just after I found the button and moved the steps." Then Thomas told all about Pesty, the horse and Mac Darrow. He even managed to make his father and mother understand that the children had been playing with him, toying with him, as if he were the object of a game.

"They were not friends," Thomas said finally. "They let me fall under those steps."

"No, they weren't if they did let you fall," said his mother, "but maybe they didn't know about that drop down."

"No," said Mr. Small, "they probably knew, but I would guess they had no real intention of causing Thomas harm. It was their joke on the 'new boy.' It wasn't a very nice joke and it was a joke that might have not worked at all. They were playing with you, Thomas, to find out what you knew. They must have thought you knew more than they did. After all, you came from far away to live in a house that no child in his right mind in these parts would dare enter. I would think that by now you are pretty famous all over town."

"I see," said Thomas. "Because I dared go into 'Mr. Pluto's tunnel'!"

"Yes," his father said.

"It wasn't a human voice I heard," Thomas said. "It wasn't alive."

They all fell silent for a moment. Then Mr. Small asked, "And you're sure you heard nothing more than that sighing?"

"That's all," Thomas said. "It just kept coming at me, getting closer."

Mr. Small got up and stood at the tunnel opening. He went into the long hall after a few seconds and came back with a flashlight. "I'll go with you," Thomas said.

"I'd rather you stayed here. I'll only be a minute," said his father.

Mr. Small was gone less than a minute. Thomas and his mother waited, staring into the tunnel opening, flooded with the light from the kitchen. A few feet beyond the opening, the



kitchen light ended in a wall of blackness. They could see the light from Mr. Small's flashlight darting here and there along the ceiling of the tunnel until the path descended.

Mr. Small returned by way of the veranda steps. His white shirt was soiled from scaling the brick wall. As he came into the kitchen, muddying the floor as Thomas had, he was thoughtful, but not at all afraid.

He walked over to a high cabinet on the opposite wall from the tunnel. Beneath it, a small panel in the wall slid open at his touch. The panel had been invisible to the eye, but now revealed what seemed to be a jumble of miniature machinery. Mr. Small released a lever. The tunnel door slid silently down, and the patterned wallpaper of the kitchen showed no trace of what lay hidden behind it. Lastly, Mr. Small removed a mechanism of some kind from the panel and put it in his pocket.

"Did you see anything?" Thomas asked him. "Did you find my flashlight?"



"I didn't see anything," Mr. Small said, "and I didn't hear any sighing."

"Well that's a relief," said Mrs. Small. "Goodness, if you'd found somebody . . . I'm sure my nerves would just give way."

"Your flashlight must have fallen in a crack," said Mr. Small. "I couldn't find it. Oh, yes, I removed the control from the panel. Without it, a giant couldn't raise that tunnel door."

"But you said there wasn't anything in the tunnel," said Thomas.

"That's so, but I don't want you wandering around in there," his father said. "The walls and ceiling are dirt and rock. There hasn't been a cave-in that I know of in a century, yet I think it best we don't take chances. I also removed the gears that control the front steps."

All he had to do was tell me not to go into the tunnel, Thomas thought. Give me a good reason and I wouldn't go . . . he knows that's all he has to do. He saw something or he heard something, and he's not going to tell anybody!

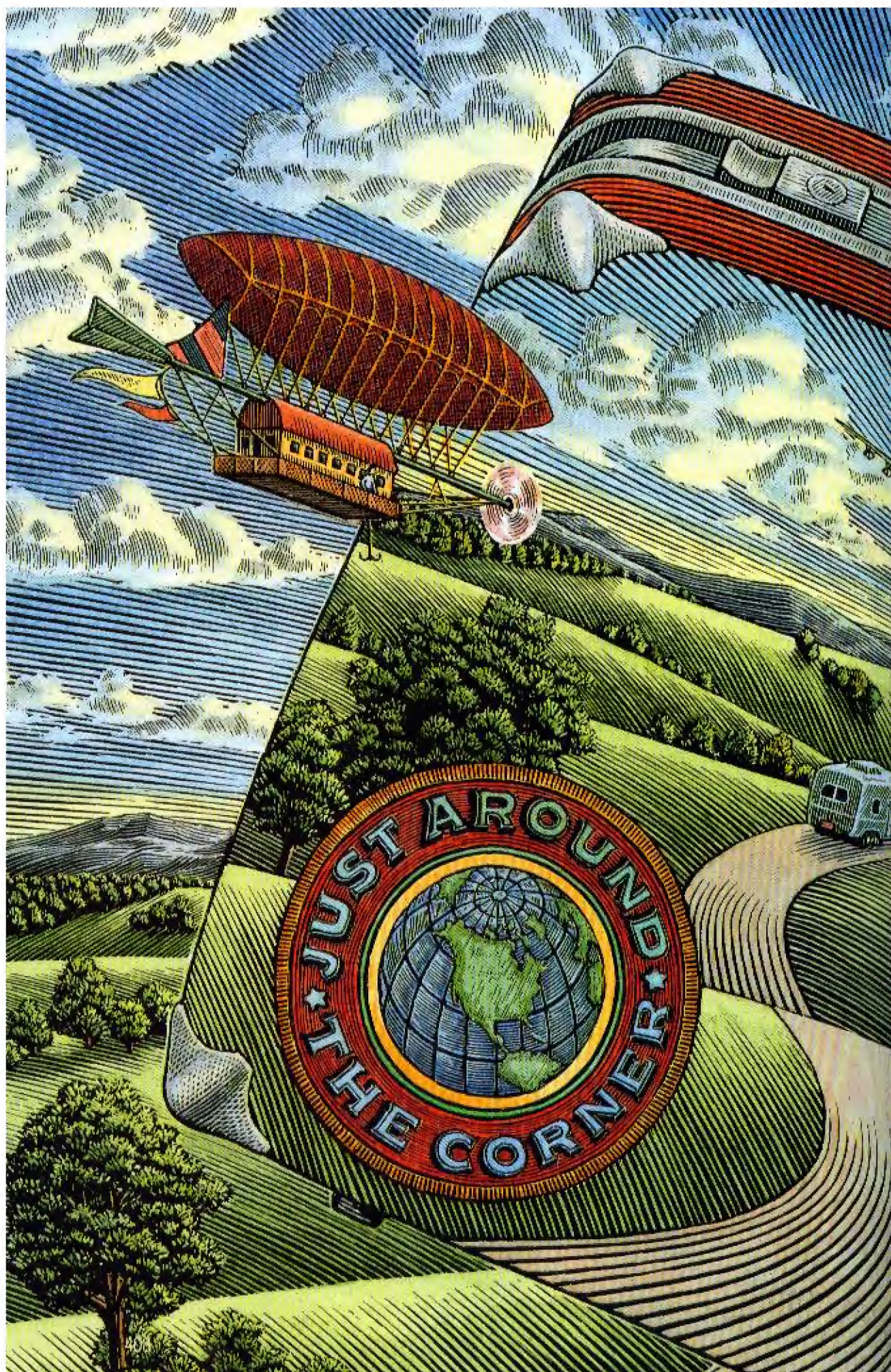
The twins had sat calmly through the commotion of Thomas' coming through the wall and their father going back through it again. Now they scrambled down from their chairs and slapped the wall with their hands. When the wall didn't move, they kicked it. They were crestfallen when the wall wouldn't slide up, as it had for Thomas.

Thomas had to laugh at them. "See? It's just a wall," he told them. They shook their heads.

"It's just a wallpapered wall with a pretty design to look at."

*In spite of what he tells the twins, Thomas remains convinced that secrets are hidden behind that wallpapered door. Share with Thomas the mysterious events in both books of the Dies Drear chronicle, The House of Dies Drear and The Mystery of Drear House.*









**THE MYSTERY OF  
DREAR HOUSE**  
by Virginia Hamilton  
Collier, 1988

The Drear house  
seen from the hill-  
top reminded him  
of a giant crow  
frozen on its  
nest. He wasn't  
sure yet

whether he liked living  
in that house. He was usually on  
his guard. Sometimes he felt some-  
thing strange was near.  
Something unseen but listening be-  
hind the walls, he thought.

**GOING PLACES: THE YOUNG  
TRAVELER'S GUIDE AND  
ACTIVITY BOOK**  
by Harriet Webster

illustrated by Gail Owens  
Aladdin, 1991



Where Do Places Get  
Their Names?  
What Do I Do If I Get  
Lost?  
Why Can't We Touch  
the Art?  
Where Do Zoos Get  
Their Animals?